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Premier kicks off AU independence — Province puts up \$2.5M for expenses as new Sault university hits ground running — COMMENT ON THIS STORY

Posted By MICHAEL PURVIS, THE SAULT STAR

Updated 3 days ago

Ontario's premier cut the ribbon on an independent Algoma University on Thursday, symbolically unlocking a door to the school's future as the province's 19th university.

Now the task for university officials will be to live up to that status, and to the school's lofty goal of nearly tripling its student body over the next decade.

To that end, AU will embark within a matter of weeks on a "pretty bold" advertising campaign in the Greater Toronto Area and a new website to help lure students north, said Celia Ross, university president.

"Off we go on our brave new world and our brave new route," Ross told an assembled crowd on Thursday. "We're joining with the University of Toronto and York University and the University of Guelph and Ryerson and Western. Algoma is one of those universities."

Students, professors and community dignitaries gathered on AU's front lawn Thursday afternoon to see Dalton McGuinty usher in a new era of independence for the 41-year-old post-secondary institution.

Independence came on June 18 when the Lieutenant Governor gave Royal Assent to legislation granting a new university charter, but officials waited until the first week of the new school year to fete their long-awaited achievement.

"I'm very optimistic about the future of this wonderful and magnificent institution, not just because of the folks here on this stage that have put their shoulders to the wheel for so long now, but because of the broad-based community support," said McGuinty. "This is a wonderful hallmark of a progressive community, enjoying a college and a university and a new hospital and so many other new investments in infrastructure being made here."

With symbolic gestures over, students at Algoma say there is some work to be done.

Programs should be expanded, with a focus on course selection and with better assurance that courses offered will be available in a given semester.

"I know when I picked my courses this year, two or three of them I had to change because they weren't actually hosted (at Algoma), they just had them on the list," said Shay Sweeney, a third-year history/political science major.

One thing Sweeney doesn't want to see change is Algoma's small-school atmosphere.

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"I've never been in a class with 200 people, but after being in a class of 20 people, I'd probably say I'd like the small class better," said Sweeney.

During his speech, the premier announced another \$2.5 million for independence expenses.

That will help bring some of the thing students are asking for, said Ross.

"Part of that will be used up with the marketing campaign, and the infrastructure backbone, but I think the most important part of it goes to hiring new faculty," said Ross.

She said a new faculty member is set to join the sociology program, helping move the program from a three-year to a four-year degree this year.

Ross told those assembled that Algoma plans to focus on being a strong small school.

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"We're the smallest one of those 19 universities and we're darned proud of it, we're darned proud of our size because small is wonderful," said Ross.

Algoma U's independence marks an end to the school's status as a Laurentian University affiliate, but some ties will remain. The two institutions are working jointly on a new library computer system, a fact Ross revealed during her speech.

And students registered at Algoma as late as this fall will retain the option of having Laurentian's name on their degree when they graduate.

As optimistic as some students are about their school's new status, they say an Algoma University degree will be a tough choice to make.

Joshua Ingram is a third-year English and history major at AU, but when he graduates in 2010, it will likely be with a Laurentian degree.

"I probably won't go out on a limb," said Ingram. "It's hard. When people look on a resume and see Algoma University they'll have a question mark in their head."

Ingram, who is the humanities rep on the Algoma University Students Union, said he is optimistic, though, having seen Algoma's course offerings expand during his short time at the school.

"Independence is going to open up some doors, obviously, and it will be interesting to see where it goes," he said.

Garden River First Nation Chief Lyle Sayers congratulated Algoma on its new status, and called on the province to grant a 20th university charter to Shingwauk University, presenting McGuinty with a Shingwauk U T-shirt in front of the crowd.

Algoma's board of governors signed a covenant with the education trust in 2006, creating a partnership seeking two degree-granting institutions that would work side by side on the site of the former Shingwauk Residential School.

"Today we're asking the government to carry on (Chief) Shingwauk's vision and that's to educate our people so we can live together side by side with our non-native friends," said Sayers.

"That's why we want to get our own charter, to educate the people and to share our vision, to share our history, to tell the truth of what happened."

Ross said Algoma is counting on the Shingwauk Education Trust's Shingwauk Kinoomage Gamig, to reach out to First Nation students to help build enrolment. She said international students will also play an important role in Algoma's growth.

Ross said that in the immediate term, the university is working on the essential aspects of being a standalone university, bringing its student record system up to snuff so that students have better access to their grades and their academic progress. She said online registration and fee payment should be available within a year.

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